The quiet minority:

The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

The biggest problem for people who are deaf or hard of hearing is communicating with people who are not. In the past, this was generally believed to be the deaf person's problem. Today, there is a glimmer of recognition that it is everybody's problem. If people who hear are unable to communicate with people who don't hear, the loss is mutual. But the burden of this loss has historically rested on the shoulders of the deaf and hard of hearing. Deaf people have been expected to learn a language based on sounds they cannot hear, but there has been no mutual expectation that hearing people should learn a language based on sight. Thus, people who are deaf or hard of hearing are similar to a cultural minority that speaks a foreign language.

Within that minority, there is an enormous range of differences. Some people are deaf from birth (this is called pre-lingual deafness), while others lose their hearing from childhood diseases or accidents. Some people are profoundly deaf; others have varying degrees of residual hearing. And, of course, many people become hard of hearing as they grow older.

All of these factors influence how people communicate. People who learn to talk before they lose their hearing may continue to express themselves orally. Some people with pre-lingual deafness work very hard to learn to speak, but this is extremely difficult. Many rely exclusively on American Sign Language (ASL) and/or other visual means of communication.

For nearly two hundred years, there has been a passionate debate about which method of communication ought to be taught to deaf children. Some have argued that deaf children should not be allowed to sign, and that they should learn to speak English and lip read so that they can participate in mainstream society. For many deaf people, learning an alphabet and a language based on sounds can be excruciatingly difficult. And lip-reading (also called speech reading) is never very accurate because so many sounds look alike when they are spoken.

Moreover, this insistence that deaf people adapt to the conventions of a hearing world denies the beauty, expressiveness and cultural power of ASL, and the acute visual sensibilities of people who don't hear.

Today, there is a growing acceptance and appreciation of ASL and the visual culture it represents. Movies such as "Children of a Lesser God" have opened the door to a wider appreciation of deaf culture. But although more people have come to admire the creativity and visual poetry of ASL, relatively few hearing people have taken the time to learn it. We may recognize, in principle, that the hearing world ought to do more to adapt to the non-hearing world, but we're a long way from that goal.

Nonetheless, new technologies have made communication possible in many situations. Teletypewriter (TTY) machines enable phone lines to receive and transmit text messages. Video relay services bring live, real-time interpreters into any room equipped with the right electronics.

Progress has also been made in technologies that help people hear better, but new kinds of hearing aids and cochlear implants are still imperfect and often frustrating. For people

with significant hearing loss - and especially for those whose hearing loss comes early in life - visual communication is still preferable.

Hearing loss and aging

As people live longer, and as the population of older people increases, there will be more people who need help to cope with hearing loss. About one third of people between the ages of 65 and 74, and half of those over 85 have hearing loss. Older people who can't hear well often become withdrawn and depressed because they feel isolated or embarrassed when they have difficulty following a conversation or using the telephone. They may also become distrustful because they can't be sure what people are saying to them or about them. People in these circumstances need encouragement to get the technological aids they need to cope with this loss.

The deaf-blind community

Children who can neither see nor hear well have unique educational and developmental needs because their experience of the world is limited to what they touch, and to what's touching them. These children are usually taught to communicate by tactile ASL - that is, the deaf-blind person touches the hand of the signer. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction has identified 31 deaf-blind children in Washington who require this kind of teaching.

Many people with deaf-blindness do have some limited vision or hearing, and may be able to see large print, or to see ASL if it is signed directly in front of them, at close range. Or they may be able to communicate using hearing aids, or hear well enough to recognize familiar voices or sounds.

Whatever their abilities, people with these conditions need the same things everyone else needs: love, companionship, a chance to participate in their communities, and opportunities to contribute by using their talents and abilities. This usually requires special technologies such as Braille TTYs or other communication aids, and personal assistants to help them buy groceries, answer their mail, and communicate with others.

The largest concentration of deaf-blind people in Washington is in Seattle, because that's where services and social activities for them are concentrated. Private organizations such as the Lighthouse and the Northwest Helen Keller Center provide training in independent living skills, vocational opportunities, and other supports. The Deaf-Blind Service Center also provides advocacy to encourage deaf-blind representation on boards and committees, case management and other services, and technical assistance to employers and service providers.

Washington's Department of Services for the Blind, which is a state agency independent of DSHS, provides assistive technologies and other services for people who are blind or have significant vision impairments. The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is beginning to work with them to serve people who have both vision and hearing loss.

The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) serves all the people of Washington state by making it possible for us to communicate with each other regardless of whether we can hear. More specifically, ODHH serves Washington's 14,000 deaf people, its 580,000 hard of hearing, and approximately 220 people who are both deaf and blind.

ODHH's original mission was to provide interpreter services that make it possible for deaf and hard of hearing people to use and communicate with the various programs of DSHS. Over time, that mission has broadened to include dissemination of new technologies, training in how to use them, and support of six regional service centers that provide peer counseling, information and referral services, community events, and advocacy for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind.

ODHH administers a contract to the Community Service Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing for training 911 operators in the use of TTY. This program was instituted following the death of a Washington

resident whose repeated attempts to reach 911 through a TTY failed.

ODHH also administers the Statewide Telecommunications Access Service. The service contracts with a private telecommunications company to provide a telephone relay system that uses trained call agents to type voiced communications to a person on a TTY, and relay typed communications by voice to telephone users. The service also distributes specialized telecommunications equipment, such as TTYs, amplified phone handsets, visual or tactile ring signalers, telebraille machines, and hands-free telecommunications equipment to qualified individuals. Trained contractors provide installation and user training sessions to the recipients.

One of the emerging telecommunications technologies that has been well-received by ODHH's customers is video relay interpreting, which operates like the TTY relay system except that it uses sign language interpreters to relay signed communications to voice users over the Internet. This has helped many people with pre-lingual hearing loss deal with the communication barriers posed by their lack of mastery of the English language in text form.

ODHH continues to work with other human services agencies to improve access to mental health, medical, chemical dependency, employment and other services. This is challenging work because there are only 170 certified ASL interpreters in the state, and because there is, as yet, limited distribution of video relay technologies. These limitations seriously compromise people's access to medical care, mental health care, employment and community participation.

One result of ODHH's collaboration is the establishment of a chemical dependency treatment center for the deaf and hard of hearing in Vancouver, Washington. This center is also used by people from several neighboring states.

Challenges facing the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Protecting the rights of the quiet minority

The historical isolation of people who are deaf or hard of hearing has impeded their full inclusion in our workplaces and our communities. Although some progress has been made since the advent of the civil rights movement for people with disabilities, the barriers to inclusion are still formidable. Approximately 65 percent of people who are deaf or hard of hearing live in poverty. For those who live in rural areas or in smaller towns and cities, access to interpreters and to communications technology is still an enormous problem. And effective advocacy and civic involvement is virtually impossible without the means to communicate.

The result is that people who are deaf or hard of hearing live in a world of frequent misunderstanding and miscommunication. Shopping for a new washing machine, finding a doctor, communicating with a child's teacher, or negotiating the price of a new car may all present difficult problems for those who don't hear well. And the lack of accurate communication puts them at serious risk of harm in many of these situations. Deaf and hard of hearing people are especially fearful when understanding English is critical to decision making about employment rights, medical, legal, and financial interests, because these are areas in which others have taken advantage of their lack of understanding.

This problem is complicated by limited family and community advocacy for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Ninety percent of the deaf are born to hearing parents, and many parents do not learn ASL. There is no statewide organization of family advocates for the deaf and hard of hearing. In the absence of such a network, the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing remain unknown to many policymakers, community leaders and most citizens.

Increasing the number of certified interpreters

Only two community colleges in Washington provide training for ASL interpreters. A third college recently dropped its certification program. This compounds the shortage of interpreters, and puts people at serious risk when no interpreter is available for doctor's appointments or medical emergencies. There is only

one private instructional program that trains community college sign language program graduates to become interpreters. Certification as an interpreter requires many hours of work to achieve the level of mastery required to pass certification examinations offered by the two national certification bodies. For many professional interpreters, this is a labor of love and intense commitment to the deaf and hard of hearing community. It is also a requirement to be recognized as a qualified service provider.

The persistent shortage of interpreters perpetuates the isolation and exclusion of people who are deaf or hard of hearing from community life, and robs our state of the contributions they might make.

Equitable access to new communication technologies

High-speed Internet access and Internet-based video technologies make visual communication possible over long distances - but only for those who live in communities served by newer, high-capacity phone lines and/or digital cable. This creates a double disadvantage for those who are deaf or hard of hearing and who live in rural areas that lack these services.

In addition, funding limitations restrict the distribution of video relay equipment and other technologies that increase the reach of the limited number of interpreters available.

Educating the Public

ODHH does not have the resources or the policy authority to undertake the broad, long-term effort that is needed to educate the public about the history, culture, or current needs of people who are deaf and hard of hearing. This is work that needs to be done if our state is to get the full benefit of the many gifts that deaf and hard of hearing people have to offer. And it is work that needs to be done to reduce the poverty, inequality, and isolation that people who are deaf and hard of hearing continue to suffer.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Washington is a leader in the nation in the use of technology to help deaf and hard of hearing people function economically and socially in the global community.

Working closely with partners, the Department of Social and Health Service's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) offers several innovative systems to enable the state's 540,000 deaf and hard of hearing residents to communicate.

These include:

- ODHH and Sprint operate Washington Video Relay Services (WA VRS), which allows deaf and hard of hearing callers to use sign language to "speak" to a Sprint relay operator via a desktop computer equipped with a videoconference camera. The operator translates the sign language verbally for people using standard telephones and then translates voiced information into American Sign Language for deaf callers. People using sign language also can use the system to communicate directly with others via WA VRS, which allows them to use gestures, facial expressions or other physical signs to enrich the experience.
- The 7-1-1 System, which quickly links deaf and hard of hearing people with teletype-phones directly to a special communication-assistant relay operator who helps them communicate directly with hearing friends, family members and businesses using regular telephones. The system is a partnership of DSHS and telephone companies across the state.
- Captioned Telephone (CapTel) is a new technology under development that would allows people to receive word-for-word captions of their telephone conversations, much like captioned television where spoken words appear as written text. CapTel would provide captions for the deaf and heard of hearing to read as conversations take place. The words of a hearing caller would be transcribed by specially-trained operators using voice recognition computers. ODHH is working with Sprint and Ultratec to begin testing this system in September 2002.
- Internet Relay: ODHH and Sprint offer the Sprint Relay Online, which allows consumers with Internet access to make telephone calls at any time. There are no long distance charges to use the service.